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**Norsemen, Normans, and Now:
A book for today's English language history student**

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REVIEW: THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

Second Edition

by Charles Barber, Joan C. Beal and Philip A. Shaw

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2009. Pp. vii + 306.

Reviewed by

Lauren Hall-Lew, University of Edinburgh

(2092 words)

The English Language: A Historical Introduction is the second edition of the popular book on English language history originally solo-authored by Charles Barber. This edition includes a number of welcome updates in-text as well as a wonderful collection of online resources. In my opinion, the revisions between the first edition (1993) and this edition (2009) are sufficiently great as to warrant the purchase of the upgrade. The best reason is the addition of the entirely new chapter on Late Modern English (and the dissolution of the quaintly titled chapter, “English in the Scientific Age”). Other changes are subtle yet very useful, such as Table 3.5, which shows a short word list for four Indo-European languages; a new section in Chapter 5 about the preservation of Old English texts; a short treatment of recent lexical innovation in Chapter 11; and a map of the counties of England, which is extremely handy for the many readers who will come to this book without intimate familiarity with English geography. The book remains engaging, easy to read, and generally accessible to those without linguistics training.

In following the structure of the first edition, the book begins with a crash course in linguistics and language change, and then proceeds chronologically through the history of the English language, from Indo-European to present-day variation. A reader versed in the basics of linguistics could easily skip the first chapter, and anyone with a background in historical linguistics could probably skip the second. Both are very good reviews, however. The remainder of the book is best read sequentially, as each chapter refers to the previous chapters. Chapters 3-11 are accompanied by two exercise questions “to facilitate inquiry-based learning” which can be downloaded from the Cambridge University Press website.

The first two chapters, “What is language?” and “The flux of language” are impressively both concise and thorough given their aim of providing thorough exposure to concepts in linguistics and language change. The first chapter follows the standard organization from phonetics to phonology, morphology, and syntax. It ends with a discussion of typology and universals. The second chapter is a solid introduction to historical linguistics, through the lens of English. It covers the mechanisms of change and the concept of the language family. One of the Figures in chapter 2 was, in the 1993 edition, a picture of British traffic signs; it has now been smartly replaced with a representation of a language network. My only critique is that more integration between these two introductory chapters would help students, specifically if more connections were made to language change in the first chapter. The first time historical linguistics is mentioned is not until page 22, on the topic of lexical classes, which means that historical linguistics is never mentioned when the

reader is introduced to phonetics, and so the relevance of committing all the phonetic symbols and articulatory terms to memory might not be immediately obvious. That said, both introductory chapters are full of interesting examples and clear explanations. If anything, they could stand to have even more examples, specifically more representations of data set apart from the text itself.

Chapter 3 covers the Indo-European languages and chapter 4 the Germanic languages, again two large topics expertly addressed in a very limited space. Giving a quick overview of IE is arguably the more challenging of the two, and I found this to be the weakest of the book's chapters. There are moments when the discussion of data gets especially technical and removed from the question of English, specifically. As a linguist, this is not a problem, but for an English student with no exposure to linguistics prior to this book, it is unfortunate that one of the most difficult chapters appears at the beginning. Chapter 3 does include the excellent addition of a new table showing a short word list comparing French, English, Danish, and German. In my opinion, including even more tables throughout the book would help emphasize the data-based analysis of historical change; there are moments in which the narrative presentation of data becomes rather dense and, though the discussion is interesting, the overall point is obscured. A plus for chapter 3 is that the section on "Grouping the Indo-European languages" has been noticeably reorganized and updated from the previous version, and now reads more clearly than before. The end of chapter 4 has also been revised, with an added paragraph concerning the Germanic borrowings of certain bound morphemes from Latin.

Chapter 5 covers Old English. This chapter logically zeroes in much more on the history and geography of England, so that knowledge of English place names, for example, is assumed. The discussion of phonetic change in this chapter might also be tough-going for the average non-linguist, and instructors using this book should be aware of both of these challenges. However, this chapter is a good example of one of the best general features of the book: excellent introductory and transition paragraphs between chapters and sections that ground the reader in the big picture without being redundant. Several small features have been revised in chapter 5 that improve upon the original edition. References to 'Celtic' society and culture have been changed to 'British'. There is a new, brief section about the preservation of OE texts. The presentation of data is cleaner than in the 1993 edition, specifically the "specimens" of OE on pages 130-136. These texts are also two of five longer textual specimens that have accompanying sound files on the internet, where readers can go to hear OE pronunciations and practice their OE reading skills.

Chapter 6 introduces the "Norsemen & Normans," and beginning with a very readable overview of the social history of contact with Vikings and the Norman Conquest. The chapter expertly addresses a number of common misunderstandings about the likely state of language contact for this period of English. The discussion of the historical relationship between English and French is particularly well done. This is the chapter where differences between U.S. and British varieties of English start to crop up, such as in the description (on page 159) of the loan word *garage* having primary stress on the first syllable; moments like this are good opportunities for American instructors to engage class discussions about the historical development of dialect difference.

Chapter 7 covers Middle English and Chapter 8 covers Early Modern English. Both chapters are very engaging and cover a number of important topics from these periods, including the beginning of spelling conventions and the changes that transpired in pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. The chapters

accomplish this in part by make good use of specimens from the *Peterborough Chronicle*, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, with accompanying sound files available online. Sound files are also available on the CUP website which correspond to Table 8.1, demonstrating the comparative pronunciations for key words in both time periods (and Modern English). Chapter 8 is a nice stand-alone introduction to the topic of loan words, and also includes some very useful topics for more general teaching purposes, including a discussion of *you* and *thou* (pages 196-197), V-S word order (page 198), and the Great Vowel Shift (page 202).

Chapter 9, and overview of Late Modern English is the only entirely new chapter in this second edition. It is written in the same engaging style as the rest of the book, and is, if anything, even more interesting and accessible to average reader. It covers the standardization of spelling conventions and the rise of spelling pronunciations, along with more general processes of standardization and the increase in published English language grammars. This is the go-to chapter for people interested in the origins of ‘rules’ about sentence-final prepositions, multiple negation, and other features linguists have come to describe in shorthand as ‘prescriptive.’ The detailed yet concise overview here argues convincingly that prescriptivism, simply construed, has never been the whole story. Like chapters 7 and 8, chapter 9 also covers changes in the verb system, changes in pronunciation (including the loss of rhoticity that is key to so much dialect variation today), and the growth of vocabulary: in scientific domains, through language contact situations, and through more general processes of affixation, compounding, conversion, and others. Indeed, this chapter could stand alone as a very basic introduction for a linguistics student interested in the range of possible word formation processes. The chapter, like the rest of the book, does have a noticeably British point of view, which readers in other parts of the world will need to bear in mind. Examples of this from Chapter 9 include the discussion of the Industrial Revolution (page 236) and Public school English (page 237).

Chapter 10 is aptly titled “English as a world language,” giving an overview of English use across the world with a good balance between the American, Australian & New Zealand, Asian, and African varieties. It also includes a brief introduction to Pidgins & Creoles. Again, variation is presented with respect to phonology, syntax, and vocabulary. The chapter ends with a very short discussion of ‘Standard English,’ here equated with written English. If there is a weakness to chapter 10, it is that this last section unfortunately gives the erroneous impression that identifying ‘standardness’ is an uncomplicated task. Much sociolinguistic work has argued, in contrast, that the ideology of standard English is complex, context-dependent, and historically situated (see Bonfiglio 2002; Mugglestone 2003). This is particularly true with respect to spoken varieties that are considered ‘standard,’ but is also true across written forms. The authors argue that differences across world varieties of written English are “small ... not enormous ... [and] negligible” (page 264). I would argue that this is not the case, particularly during a era in which much of our written language is being produced on the internet and often in the form of spontaneous conversation.

Chapter 11 addresses the question of “English today and tomorrow.” Again, the authors rightly point out that many of the descriptions in this chapter apply primarily or exclusively to British English varieties; instructors in other parts of the world can, again, use this chapter as a foundation for leading students in conversations comparing their local variety to the changes described. However, much of the phenomena discussed span and transcend geographic boundaries. The section

on changes in vocabulary in particular is a nice companion to the one in the preceding chapter, this one having been updated quite substantially since the first edition, and now almost entirely devoted to the technological innovations that have transpired since then. As I argued regarding the first chapter, more links could be made in this last chapter between present-day variation and the historical social variation that forms the core of the book. Readers will likely react to the current variation with more judgement than the historical variation, and the advantage of positioning this chapter at the end of a historical textbook is that the authors have a perfect opportunity to make those links very explicitly. This is not to say that these links are absent, but that they could be made more often. Lastly, a few minor corrections of note, stemming from my own research biases: first, the mention of /l/-"velarization" on page 275 should in fact be "vocalization." Secondly, the reference on page 266 to "Silicone Valley," which an obscure pun on Northern California's Silicon Valley, is odd here, particularly since the authors do not mention either Silicon Valley or San Fernando Valley (the actual name of the area), despite their reliance on "Valley Girl" as a linguistic descriptor.

My overall opinion is that the second edition of *The English Language* is sufficiently improved over the first edition to justify assigning it to students even if it's slightly more expensive or more difficult to obtain. However, there are some disadvantages for the average *American Speech* reader and their students, enough to warrant a few further recommendations. There is a slight but general need for more sociolinguistic theory, and the focus is very heavily (though understandably) on Great Britain. The first concern can be addressed by supplementing this text with a book such as *A Social History of English* by Dick Leith. The second issue is easily overcome by readers in the U.S. by referring to a book such as *American English: Dialects and Variation* by Walt Wolfram & Natalie Schilling Estes, and by an instructor using dialect differences as discussion points in class. Despite these concerns, as a stand-alone text, the 2009 edition of *The English Language* is an impressively concise and thorough introduction to the history of English, and I recommend it fully.

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